

Analysis of Conceptual Metonymy of Verbal-to-Nominal Shift in English and Chinese

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The phenomenon of verbal-to-nominal shift (hereafter referred to as “V-N shift”) exists in both English and Chinese. It reflects both the universal conceptual metonymic thinking and the principle of linguistic economy. Focusing on conceptual metonymy theory and combined with the Event Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM), this paper systematically compares the V-N shift phenomenon in English and Chinese. The study shows that English and Chinese V-N shifts share the core cognitive mechanism of “conceptual proximity within the Event ICM”, while significant differences exist in type distribution and usage frequency. This analysis not only helps deepen the understanding of the cognitive logic behind English and Chinese V-N shifts but also provides a new perspective for the study of word-class conversion and the relationship between language and thinking.

Keywords: English-Chinese verbal-to-nominal shift, conceptual metonymy, Event ICM Model

Introduction

Verbs and nouns are considered two universal categories present in all languages (Croft, 2000, pp. 65-102). The mutual conversion between verbs and nouns has long been a focus of linguistic research. As a typical type of zero-derivation word-formation, V-N shift refers to the use of a verb as a noun through the transfer of grammatical function without the addition of affixes. This phenomenon is widespread in both English and Chinese. For example, the Chinese word “*guihua*” (verb: “plan transportation” → noun: “urban planning”) and the English word “design” (verb: “design a logo” → noun: “the design”).

Traditional studies have mostly focused on grammatical and semantic aspects, failing to explain differences in V-N shift (e.g., “*diaocha*” [investigate] can be nominalized as “market research”, while “*bengtiao*” [jump] is hardly nominalized). The root cause lies in the neglect of the underlying cognitive driving force. Although cognitive linguistics uses conceptual metonymy to explain V-N shift (e.g., Lakoff used the “Event ICM” to explain the shift from “cook” to “chef”), such studies mostly focus on English, lacking systematic comparisons between English and Chinese and discussions on cultural cognitive differences, thus leaving a research gap (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 28).

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With conceptual metonymy and the Event ICM as the framework, this paper aims to fill this gap. Theoretically, it reveals the common cognitive foundations (conceptual proximity, cognitive salience) and differences of English and Chinese V-N shifts; practically, it provides guidance for second language teaching and translation. The study focuses on answering three questions: first, whether the two languages share the core mechanism of “conceptual proximity within the Event ICM”; second, the quantitative differences in type distribution and usage frequency; third, the cognitive and cultural causes behind these differences.

The Cognitive Mechanism of Conceptual Metonymy Based on ICM

The essence of ICM is the “cognitive field foundation” for the operation of conceptual metonymy, and it is also the core theoretical prerequisite for analyzing the commonalities and differences of English and Chinese V-N shifts. Lakoff defines the Idealized Cognitive Model (ICM) as a conventionalized knowledge network formed by humans integrating experiences in specific domains. Its core value lies in providing “conceptual proximity within the same framework” for conceptual metonymy. Metonymic relationships are based on people’s life experiences and exist systematically in the conceptual world. For example, “place-for-event” metonymy is based on people’s cognitive experiences of the salience of the event’s location. Therefore, conceptual proximity between entities within the same cognitive framework is the basis for the emergence of metonymic relationships. Conceptual proximity is the underlying logic of V-N shift (using an action to refer to event participants) (Lakoff, 1987). For instance, the Event ICM of the Chinese word “*bangfu*” (assist) includes participants such as “assistants, assisting action, recipients of assistance, and assistance projects”—these participants are the cognitive sources of metonymic types like “action-for-agent” and “action-for-tool” discussed later. The proximity between “design action” and “design outcome” in the Event ICM of the English word “design” also corresponds to the comparative dimension of “action-for-result” later. Without ICM, the metonymic association of V-N shift cannot be established (Lu, 2025, pp. 1-10).

Conceptual Metonymy: The Cognitive Motivation for English and Chinese V-N Shifts

Cognitive salience is the core condition triggering V-N shift. By nature, it refers to the difference in attention priority that cognitive subjects assign to elements in the Event ICM based on context and cultural habits. Since actions are directly related to the event process, they inherently have high salience and become the “reference point” for metonymic mapping. In the Event ICM of “*guihua*” (plan), the “planning action” is more perceivable than the “planning plan” (result), so the metonymy of “*guihua*” referring to “planning plan” is naturally valid. In the Event ICM of the English word “design”, the salience of “design action” is higher than that of “design outcome”, prompting “design” to shift from a verb to a noun. This logic also applies to the V-N shift of “*bangfu*” (assist): the high salience of the “assisting action” enables it to activate the non-salient participant “assistance projects” (tools). The Event ICM framework mentioned earlier provides a cognitive carrier for the difference in salience, ensuring a clear path for metonymic mapping.

As a special type of mapping and activation process, V-N shift reflects the basic metonymic cognitive model of humans. Conceptual metonymy not only provides the cognitive motivation for V-N shift but also serves as an important mechanism for interpreting this conversion process. The semantic evolution of V-N shift follows the path of “temporary use → high-frequency use → conventionalization”, driven by the “principle of linguistic

economy”: by reusing existing verbs to extend word meanings, there is no need to create new words, thus improving the efficiency of language expression. Take the Chinese word “*fanyi*” (translate) as an example: initially, it was used temporarily in “do translation”, relying on the proximity between “action and agent” in the “translation” Event ICM. With increased usage frequency, its context expanded to “senior translator”, and finally, the usage of “*fanyi*” as a noun referring to “translator” was conventionalized. The English word “love” evolved similarly: from the verb “love” (e.g., “I love you”) to a temporarily used noun (e.g., “a deep love”), and finally to the semantic solidification of “love” (as a noun meaning “affection”). This evolution relies on the association between “action and emotional entity” in the “emotion” Event ICM, covering both “action” and “entity” meanings without creating new words. This evolutionary path reflects the role of the linguistic economy principle in promoting the semantic solidification of V-N shifts, and also lays the groundwork for the subsequent comparison of semantic evolution speed differences between English and Chinese.

There is an essential difference in cognitive logic between V-N shift and other word-class conversions (e.g., nominal-to-verbal shift, adjectival-to-verbal shift). This difference highlights the particularity of V-N shift and ensures the accuracy of the research object. Nominal-to-verbal shift relies on the “entity-action association” in the Entity ICM, with the core of using an entity to refer to a related action. Adjectival-to-verbal shift relies on the “attribute-action association” in the Attribute ICM, with the core of using an attribute to refer to “the action of endowing something with that attribute”. In contrast, V-N shift relies on the “process-entity association” in the Event ICM, with the core of using an action process to refer to nominal participants in the event—this is completely different from the cognitive frameworks of the other two types of conversions. For example, the nominal-to-verbal shift “book → to book” is an association of “entity (book) → action (to reserve)”, while the V-N shift “design → design” is an association of “action (to design) → entity (design outcome)”; the adjectival-to-verbal shift “cool → to cool” is an association of “attribute (cool) → action (to cool down)”, while the V-N shift “*bangfu* → assistance project” is an association of “action (to assist) → entity (tool)”. Clarifying this difference can eliminate the interference of nominal-to-verbal and adjectival-to-verbal shifts, making the subsequent focus on English-Chinese V-N shift comparison more targeted.

Comparative Analysis of V-N Shifts in English and Chinese from a Perspective of Conceptual Metonymy

The V-N shift process is the result of the cognitive operation of conceptual metonymy, whose essence is using an action to metonymically refer to participants in the Event ICM. According to the differences in conceptual metonymic relationships between actions and event participants (agent, patient, result, tool, manner, time, place), the V-N shift phenomenon in English and Chinese can be divided into seven types: action-for-agent, action-for-patient, action-for-result, action-for-tool, action-for-manner, action-for-time, and action-for-place. The following will enumerate typical V-N shift phenomena in English and Chinese by category, and comparatively analyze the similarities, differences, and causes of conceptual metonymic cognitive operations in the process of verbs being used as nouns.

Action-for-Agent: High Frequency in Chinese, Low Frequency in English

Relying on the core proximity of “action-agent”, Chinese has many cases (nearly 90 cases in the BCC corpus) such as “*bianji*” (edit) and “*daoyou*” (guide), covering the fields of education and cultural tourism. This

stems from the cognitive habit of “emphasizing actions” in Chinese. English has only about a dozen cases (in the BNC corpus) such as “cook” and “cheat”, and tends to use affixes like “-er” and “-or” for word-formation (e.g., “edit→editor”), reflecting the preference of “emphasizing entities”.

Action-for-Patient: Restricted in Chinese, Flexible in English

Chinese has only over 20 cases, such as “*baishe*” (decorate) and “*huafei*” (spend), which are prone to ambiguity without context (e.g., “*jinkou*” (import) needs to be combined with the “trade” context). English has abundant cases such as “drink” and “import”; the BNC corpus shows that “drink” used as a noun to refer to “beverage” accounts for 38% of cases, which can be understood without complex context. This is due to the stable conceptual proximity of “action-patient” and the independent grammatical function of English nouns.

Action-for-Result: Abundant in Chinese, Dependent on Original Nouns in English

Chinese has more than 100 cases (in the BCC corpus) such as “*zongjie*” (summarize) and “*sheji*” (design), covering the fields of cultural creation and engineering technology, with solidified semantics (e.g., “*zongjie*” (summarize) as a noun refers to “summary report”). English has few such cases and mostly relies on original nouns (e.g., the result of “summarize” is expressed by “summary”, and the result of “create” is expressed by “creation”); only a few cases like “build” and “answer” exist, accounting for less than 5% of cases in the BNC corpus, reflecting the habit of “emphasizing entities” in referring to results.

Action-for-Tool: Diverse in Chinese, Context-Restricted in English

Chinese has more than 50 cases (in the corpus), such as “*zhengming*” (prove) and “*baozhang*” (guarantee), covering the fields of administration and commerce, which conforms to the thinking of “defining categories by use” (e.g., “*shenpi*” (examine and approve) as a noun refers to “approval document”). English has only cases like “cover” and “pass”, which need to rely on specific contexts such as “espionage activities” and “access control management”; in daily expressions, it tends to use dedicated nouns like “ID card” and “packaging material”, focusing on “the entity attributes of tools”.

Action-for-Manner: Low Frequency in Both English and Chinese

Chinese has fewer than 10 cases, such as “*mianshou*” (teach face-to-face) and “*daban*” (dress up), mostly colloquial expressions; in formal contexts, words like “way” and “form” are used to clearly refer to manner. English has cases like “bark” and “pour”, mostly with metaphorical meanings and extremely low frequency (the use of “bark” as “barking manner” accounts for 2% of its noun uses in the BNC corpus); it often uses “way”, “method” or “-ing” forms (e.g., “teaching in person”) to express manner.

Action-for-Time: Dependent on Specific Events in Both English and Chinese

Using actions to refer to time periods when events occur is rare in both English and Chinese and relies on event contexts.

In Chinese, there are fewer than five such cases, including “*lichun*” (verb: “spring begins” → noun: “the Beginning of Spring (solar term)”, e.g., “*lichun biao zhi chuntian kaishi*” [the Beginning of Spring marks the start of spring]) and “*kongxian*” (verb: “be free” → noun: “free time”, e.g., “*ta yi you kongxian jiu dushu*” [he reads whenever he has free time]). Furthermore, “*lichun*” is a dedicated solar term noun, which goes beyond the scope of simple verbal conversion; “*kongxian*” depends on the “time” context, otherwise it is easily interpreted as “the

state of being free”. Chinese tend to use “solar term names”, “time nouns”, or “action + time” collocations to clarify time, which aligns with the expression habit of “directness and precision”.

In English, examples like “harvest” (verb: “gather crops” → noun: “harvest season”, e.g., “rain in harvest is bad” [rain during the harvest season is harmful]) and “break” (verb: “take a rest” → noun: “break time”, e.g., “take a break” [take a break]) mostly rely on contexts such as “agricultural production” and “daily cycles”, and “break” is closer to “state-to-noun conversion”. In the BNC corpus, the use of “harvest” as a time noun accounts for less than 3% of its total noun uses. In most cases, words like “season”, “time”, or “action + time” collocations (e.g., “harvest season”) are used to express time. This is because English regards time as an independent category that must be identified by specific nouns, and metonymy cannot hold without specific contexts.

Action-for-Place: Dependent on Context in Both English and Chinese

Using actions to refer to places of occurrence or destinations is low-frequency in both English and Chinese and requires contextual support.

In Chinese, there are fewer than five such cases, including “*jituo*” (verb: “entrust emotions” → noun: “place of spiritual sustenance”, e.g., “*jingshen que shao jituo*” [lack spiritual sustenance]) and “*guishu*” (verb: “belong to” → noun: “place of ownership”, e.g., “*fangchan de guishu*” [ownership of the property]). Moreover, “*guishu*” depends on the “ownership” context; otherwise, it is easily misinterpreted as “owner”. When separated from context, words like “*difang*” (place) or “*changsuo*” (location) must be used to clarify the reference (e.g., “*qinggan jituo de difang*” [a place for emotional sustenance]). This is because the “action-place” conceptual proximity is extremely weak—the same action can occur in multiple places, and Chinese tends to use dedicated spatial nouns to avoid ambiguity.

In English, examples such as “cover” (verb: “take shelter” → noun: “shelter”, e.g., “sought cover from wind” [sought shelter from the wind]) and “divide” (verb: “separate” → noun: “boundary line”, e.g., “mountain is the divide” [the mountain serves as the boundary line]) rely on contexts like “weather protection” or “geographical environment” and have extremely low frequency. In the BNC corpus, the use of “cover” as “shelter” accounts for only 1% of its noun usages. In daily expressions, there is a greater tendency to use dedicated nouns such as “shelter” or “boundary”, reflecting the emphasis on “spatial entity”. It is believed that places must be defined by specific spatial nouns, and metonymy cannot hold without context.

Conclusion

From the perspective of conceptual metonymy, English and Chinese V-N shifts are essentially the result of metonymic mapping of “action-participants” within the Event ICM. They not only confirm the universality of metonymic cognitive thinking in humans but also highlight the cognitive and cultural differences between the two languages. Whether it is the Chinese “*bangfu*” (action → assistance project), “*zongjie*” (action → summary report), or the English “design” (action → design outcome), “cook” (action → chef), all rely on “conceptual proximity” and “cognitive salience” to realize metonymy, sharing the core cognitive logic that “the Event ICM provides an association framework, and cognitive salience determines the trigger priority”.

Comparatively, Chinese V-N shifts are more abundant and frequent. Especially in the three core proximity types (“action-for-agent”, “action-for-result”, “action-for-tool”), the number of cases in the BCC corpus reaches more than 200, reflecting the cognitive habit of the Chinese nation to “emphasize action processes”—actions are

the core of events, and the attributes of participants are reflected through actions. In contrast, English has fewer than 50 cases in these three core proximity types in the BNC corpus and relies more on original nouns or affixation for word-formation (e.g., “edit → editor”), reflecting the cognitive preference of “emphasizing entity attributes”. This is essentially the divergence between the “process-priority” and “entity-priority” cognitive models.

Both languages show low frequency in the three peripheral proximity types (“action-for-manner”, “action-for-time”, “action-for-place”), with fewer than 10 cases each. This is not only because the conceptual proximity between these dimensions and actions is weak—manner, time, and place are auxiliary elements of events with low cognitive salience—but also reflects the commonality of metonymic thinking in English and Chinese: they prioritize attention to the core elements of events and tend to use dedicated words to clearly refer to auxiliary elements to avoid semantic ambiguity. This confirms the law that metonymic thinking is constrained by both “cognitive economy” and “semantic accuracy”.

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